



Connecticut Farm Bureau Association

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Legislative Program Review and Investigation Committee, Connecticut General Assembly

Testimony regarding the CT Department of Agriculture: Farmland Preservation Program.

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The following testimony is submitted on behalf of the Connecticut Farm Bureau, a statewide nonprofit membership organization of over 5,000 families dedicated to farming and the future of Connecticut agriculture.

Senator Fonfara, Representative Rowe and members of the Committee,

The Connecticut Farm Bureau continues its long history of support for the CT Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program.

Since the programs inception in 1978 the state has permanently protected nearly 40,000 acres on close to 300 of CT's best farms. The program utilizes permanent deed restrictions known as conservation easements that run with the land. Farmers sell to the state that the development rights but retain all the other rights of ownership including the right to sell or transfer the remaining rights to family members or other farmers including new farmers. As a result the voluntary program is a much more equitable way of protecting farmland as compared to restrictive zoning regulations that result in the loss of equity for farmers. The result is a permanent base of the state's best farmland protected in perpetuity for agriculture.

CT farmers are often land rich and cash poor. In many cases the only retirement farmers have is the value of their land. The Farmland Preservation Program is a very important tool for estate planning, business transition and succession planning as it can provide the necessary funds to carry out such plans for farmers. In addition because the development rights have been removed, the cost of the protected farmland is significantly lower than land with full development rights. This has been an important ongoing benefit as it has allowed for new and existing farmers to afford land and lower the barriers of entry. In fact there farmers all over the state that will tell you that if it was not for the availability of lower-cost land that has been protected they would not be in business.

The public has benefited from the investment in farmland as well. Protected farmland provides a critical mass of land that make up the rural character of our state. Local municipalities have recognized that agricultural land use planning is important to their plans of conservation and development and not just waiting for an higher value use. There is significant environmental benefits to protecting our farmland including water quality, critical habitat and bio-diversity. In addition farmland uses very little in terms of community services especially compared to the alternative of residential development. The interest in local food and concerns about food security have has only strengthened the support for farmland preservation and the original goal to protect 135,000 acres seems as relevant as ever.

The Department of Agriculture has done a good job of administering the Farmland Preservation Program. The selection criteria has been utilized to assure the that critical agricultural attributes are prioritized so that the best and most productive farmland is protected. As a result of choosing the best farmland a very high percentage of land protected by the Farmland Preservation Program is in production every year. The

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Department of Agriculture Farmland Preservation staff are engaged with the agricultural community and have earned the confidence and respect of farmers through years of service and outreach. The process of evaluating, planning and the ultimate decision by farmers to protect their land can take years. The steady and reliable funding from bonding and the Community Investment Act has been important as it has allowed for steady progress and momentum for the program and farmers have relied on that program reliability to be there when they are ready to protect their land.

The Connecticut Farm Bureau represents all segments of CT agriculture, large and small food and non-food. We believe that agriculture can continue to thrive in CT but it is critical that land is available for all of agriculture for that to happen. We believe that the continuation of the Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program is a critical element in reaching that goal.